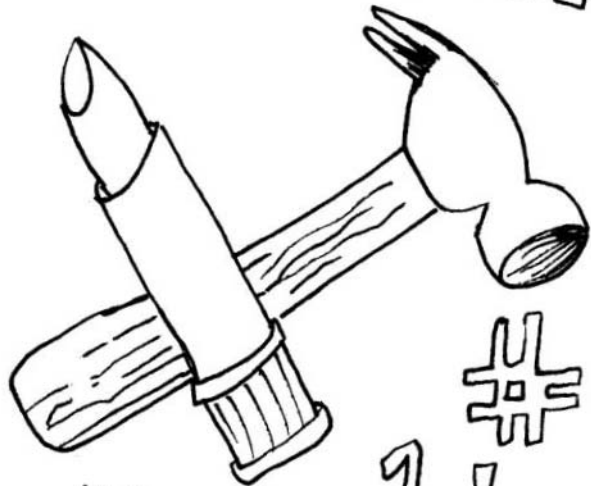


On Being Hard Femm e



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WANG

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INTRODUCTION

Here's a little zine that poured out of me after an impromptu "ladies brunch" made with dumpstered food while visiting Baltimore. It was sparked by the remembrance of the excitement of discovering "hard femme," and how empowering that was for me.

I first came across the term "hard femme" from a zine titled "Hard Femme Bike Tour," which I printed from the Queer Zine Archive Project. I was getting ready to do some journeying alone on my bicycle and was looking for literature to inspire. The term "hard femme" resonated with me deeply because it spoke to my confused and sometimes incoherent/contradictory gender identity. On some days I even felt bad about my gender expression. I love to wear red lipstick, but don't shave my legs or armpits. I like to dress sexy, but not for men. I wear dresses, but will gleefully hop into a dumpster or crawl under a fence while sporting my finest. I'll bicycle 60 miles in 4 and a half hours in 98 degree weather wearing heeled boots and a knife on my belt.

Both my girlfriend and I have this muddled gender configuration consisting of elements of both toughness and femininity--she's good with power tools but has long blonde wavy hair. On some days people would debate who was more femme. I'd get offended if people said that I was because femme is usually associated with weakness. People would say, "you wear dresses!" But to me, it didn't make me any less tough.

Hard femme made me realize that gender can be more fun and dynamic than that, and more open-ended than the typical "butch-femme" dichotomy that people set up. Not only is that dichotomy false and reductive, but the idea that there is even a spectrum the runs from butch to femme is false. This shit is not linear. We can be everything and nothing at once. We can fuck with everyone's notion of what these categories mean. And we should do it without apology!

So here's to hard femme. A dynamic merging of opposites, a new way to meddle with the categories, and above all, a vision of how to exist in the world in a way that makes us feel confident, strong, and empowered. Because we are in control of who we are. Because identity is shifting and creative! Because it's exciting to re-invent the meaning of terms, to imagine without being what they have imagined for us. Tear it down with a smirk on yr faaaaace-----

-jackie
Baltimore 2009

WHAT IS HARD FEMME?

Not much has been written about it. Most people, even many of those who move within queer circles, are unfamiliar with the term. But that's not a bad thing! The newness of the term just means there's more room to play. Most of this zine is about what hard femme means to me. It sometimes means something very personal to me because it's tied so closely to my understanding of myself and my growth as a person. It might be different for you...and I hope it is!

Here's what the Urban Dictionary has to say about the term:

1. **hard femme**

Not to be mistaken with the typical femme, the "hard femme" describes herself as "queer", is political, looks more feminine than masculine, and if prompted, can kick some serious ass. She doesn't need to "wear the pants" in a relationship- the hard femme rules with a dress. She not only despises the gender binary, she works to dismantle it.

Misogynist Butch: "There she is! It's that femme I told you about that tried to wear one with me!"

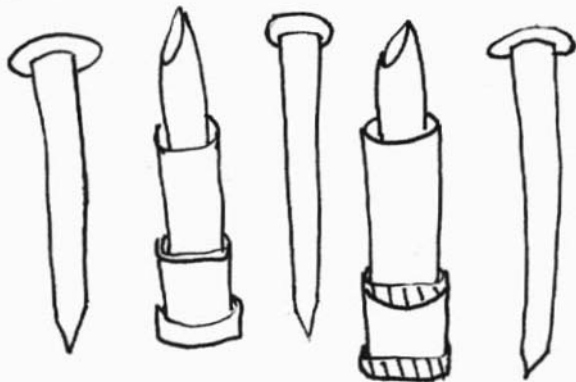
(Not necessarily misogynist) Butch #2: You should've known better. That girl's got "hard femme" written all over her.

For me, hard femme is about being tough, badass, strong, independent, dirty, feminine, queer, sensitive, sexy, intellectual, playful, thoughtful, open, positive and uncompromising. It's about being shy and lifting weights. It's about knowing skills and having self-esteem. It's about feminism. Hard femme is not just a look, it's a state of mind, a way of feeling good about your abilities, a way of feeling good in your skin.

When I found out about "hard femme," I was so fucking excited. I couldn't wait to tell people about this idea that helped make sense of my incongruencies. I couldn't wait to tell my girlfriend because she had witnessed my strivings toward mental and physical strength and was always telling me how well I was doing and encouraging me to cultivate what we coined as "sexy-badass style." I'd stand in front of the mirror making an

angry "fuck off!" face while flexing my biceps and we'd laugh at my pseudo macho-ism. Angela Davis and Assata were my heroes. I looked to them daily. I started biking long distances, running, swimming, lifting weights and deconstructing my own mental fetters--all the things I had learned being raised as an Asian girl in this sick society, all the bullshit fed to me that was meant to break me, to make me think I was weak so I wouldn't discover my strength. One day it appeared to me. And I ran with it.

Today we discover our strength.



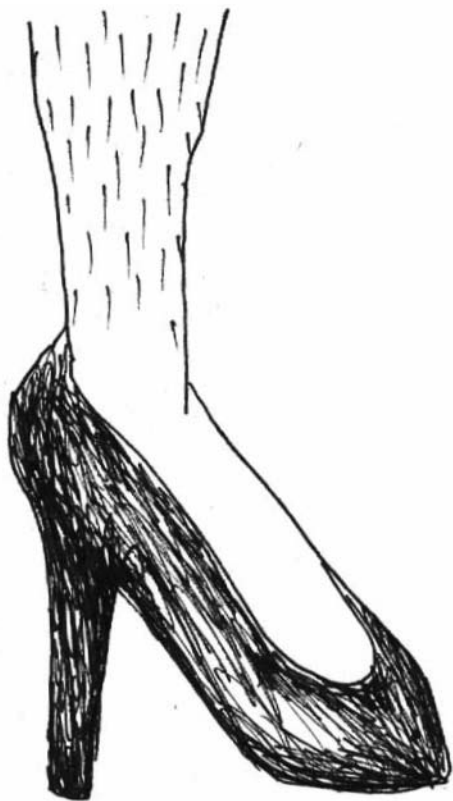
ON BEING STRONG

Being strong is not just about physical strength. A definition of strength based merely on physical ability risks being profoundly ableist. I am still working to undo my own physical-centric ideas about the meaning of strength. But ultimately, for me becoming stronger has always been about overcoming what I perceive to be a limitation--whether self or socially-imposed. Not believing in myself was the root of my weakness.

When I started to believe in myself, I tried to do more and more things. More and more things became demystified, fear began to melt away and I was on a roll. I felt energized, like I was really breaking out. With every little improvement, every little accomplishment, I was becoming more free. My sense of the possibilities was expanding. I even learned ways to turn my failures into important keys to understanding, lessons learned the hard way. When I gave up on bicycling and hitchhiked past the Appalachian Mountains on my way from Pittsburgh to Baltimore, I didn't beat myself up. Biking up mountains is hard and I laughed at

myself for being so naive as to think I could bike as far through mountains as I could in flat-as-a-pancake Florida.

But becoming physically stronger was an important part of me becoming mentally stronger. Because it really proved to me that I wasn't nearly as weak as I thought I was, or that improvement was possible. I really emphasized endurance because I've never had a car and became interested in using my body to take me places. I began bicycling long distances every day and doing lots of physical activity. I learned how to fix my bike so I wouldn't get stuck. I began to think of myself as stronger, tougher, and felt more connected to my body rather than seeing it as something to hate. I used to be depressed--thought of myself as weak, ugly, chubby and all that bullshit they tell us. It took a lot to realize all that shit was untrue. I've still got a ways to go.



THE RACIALIZATION OF FEMININITY AND SEXUALITY

How do people perceive me and how do I perceive myself? I just wrote about all the effort that went into viewing myself as tough and strong. But what about how others perceive me? Or how I've been told I should present myself? I'm little--under 5 foot 2 inches and small-framed. I hate being little. I'm a woman. An Asian woman. For many, Asian women are the epitome of femininity--dainty, subservient, soft, cute, weak, innocent, quiet, and born to serve men.

I hate this shit. I used to take some of these things as a compliment until I began to realize how racialized they were. Sometimes when people call me cute I react and scream, I'M NOT FUCKING CUTE! It's not even that I don't like it when people say or think I'm cute. It's a reaction against the view of Asian girls as these mere empty and cute beings--hardly people and devoid of depth. Mostly this reaction is born out of fucked up experiences with Asian fetishists--those white men with "yellow fever."

Embedded in the idea of the hyper-feminine Asian woman is an assumed heterosexuality. Queerness and lesbianism is considered deviant and heterosexuality is considered healthy and normal. Since Asian women are viewed as normal, meek conformists, Asian women are also assumed to be heterosexual. Outwardly feminine women often are read as heterosexual, so the association of Asianness with femininity adds another form of heterosexism.

I've caught myself falling into these traps, even as a queer Asian woman. When I first met one of my best friends, who is Chinese, I was surprised to find out she was a lesbian because she seemed so "in-the-lines" before I knew her. I realized later that this view was a distorted learned racist way of reading people's sexuality.

For me, being hard femme is also about challenging our racialized ideas about femininity and about challenging the association of femininity with weakness. I like meeting badass dyke Asian women and reading zines and stories by femme queer Asian women writers. Like Beverly Yuen

Thompson, a tattooed professor who's research on queer/bi hapa (half or part Asian) women taught me many lessons about how I think about myself and the complexity of identity.

I like being unconventionally femme, unconventionally Asian, unconventionally tough (none of the macho bullshit), and stirring it all up, overturning expectations while laying claim to these categories. But without allegiance. With movement.

HARD FEMME MOMENTS

Hard femme is a fun and playful practice in gender (de)construction.

Hard femme is...

- Long hair on your head...and legs!
- Miniskirts that reveal...legs covered in bike grease!
And muscular calves!
- Being told "WAAAIT, Jackie! Don't get in the dumpster! You'll get your dress dirty!" And hopping in while laughing at such a silly notion!
- Long nails that are dirty underneath
- Love to cook but hate to clean!
- Re-applying lipstick while sweatin' hard on the side of the road
- Being a woman and traveling alone
- Tossing your bike and gear over a tall fence and waving a pink bandana/holding a heart drawing to catch a ride
- Understanding that being tough and does not mean being negative and ditching love
- Earrings and boy haircuts
- Power tools, bruises, boots, and flower in hair
- Positive relationships to food

WHAT IS HARD FEMME TO YOU??

Send me your thoughts!

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